



the trail of coacoochee

by Peter Daniel Davis

The settlers called him “Wildcat,” the Mexicans, “Gato del Monte,” or Mountain Lion. The Seminoles, who fought with him and would follow him when he left Florida called him “Coacoochee”—Little Bobcat, or Bobcat the Younger. During the Second Seminole War, he would lead his people on raids against the troops of Colonel Zachary Taylor, and after the death of Osceola in 1838, Coacoochee would become the principal war leader of the Seminoles. He could be violent and ruthless—and he could also brag about it.

Yet the warrior was also a brilliant statesman and leader, highly regarded by American military leaders, including General Thomas Sidney Jesup, American commander in Florida. Though Jesup would later take him prisoner, he wrote in a communication to the Secretary of War, “He is decidedly the most talented man I have seen among the Seminoles, and should, no doubt will, be the principal Chief of the nation...”

Coacoochee was of the Wind Clan, the son of Emathla. Because of his lineage, his training would have included etiquette, cosmology, diplomacy, and public speaking. He would also have learned the ways of the hunter and warrior. Likely, his medical training included various ways of treating diseases, including the use of songs. It would also have included how to treat gunshot wounds.



Coacoochee (Wild Cat)
Institute of Texan Cultures at UTSA

In October of 1837, Coacoochee traveled to St. Augustine under a flag of truce to negotiate with General Jesup, who had imprisoned his father. Despite the flag of truce, Jesup imprisoned him along with those who had traveled with him. On November 29th, twenty of the prisoners, including Coacoochee, made a daring escape by climbing a fifteen-foot wall in their cell and then, one-by-one, pushing through a tiny opening that tore their skin. Coacoochee’s ailing father remained behind.

Declaring in 1841 that there was nothing to be achieved in continued resistance, Coacoochee chose to leave Florida and move west with his followers. But his work as a leader and diplomat would continue. After settling in the Little River Region in Texas, Coacoochee agreed in 1845 to accompany a U.S. commission that had been sent to the region. Its purpose was to negotiate a treaty with the different tribes in the area, particularly the Comanches, who were known for their ferocity.

Early in the 1700s, a man named Brim, the micco, or leader of a specific lineage, had guided the Muscogeans through diplomatic maneuvering that would play the Americans, Spanish, and British in opposition to each other. During the late 1700s, Alexander McGillivray, the son of a Scotsman and a Koasati woman, drew on his European style education, his clan's status, and his father's wealth to help bring greater unity to the Muscogean towns, using similar tactics that Brim employed with the Spanish, British, and Americans. And so, much later, Coacoochee would use similar tactics in dividing the U.S. and Mexico.

He also reestablished the Seminoles annual hunting cycle and guided the Seminoles in establishing trade with various Texas groups including the Plains tribes. After he brought his three

A Seminole woman would wear several strings of beads, receiving her first string when she was young. She would have felt immodestly dressed without them. The earrings are made from ten-cent pieces.



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communities to Mexico, he was able to gain treaties securing land grants from the Mexican government. Here, their own law was respected, although at times the Mexican government did attempt to impose their religious views on the Seminoles.

In his later years, Coacoochee said that he wanted to live in peace with the whites, having seen all the war he cared to, often living or traveling under harsh conditions, and wishing to look after his children and his people. Coacoochee died of smallpox in January 1857 in Coahuila, Mexico. Less than a year before, the United States had recognized the national status of the Seminoles in a treaty. Known through the oral history of the Seminoles and letters written by United States military officers who were his contemporaries, Coacoochee is remembered by the Seminoles as a remarkable thinker and a great leader.

Coacoochee's Bones: A Seminole Saga by Susan A. Miller is an excellent biography of the Seminole leader. James W. Covington's book, *The Seminoles of Florida*, is a highly readable account of the Seminoles from precolonial days through the 20th Century. Both books are available from book vendors on GSA Schedule 76, Publication Media.

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The costume of a Seminole man during the late 19th or early 20th century would consist of a silver banded turban with feathers, a neckerchief, a cotton shirt, a beaded shoulder sash, and a jacket.

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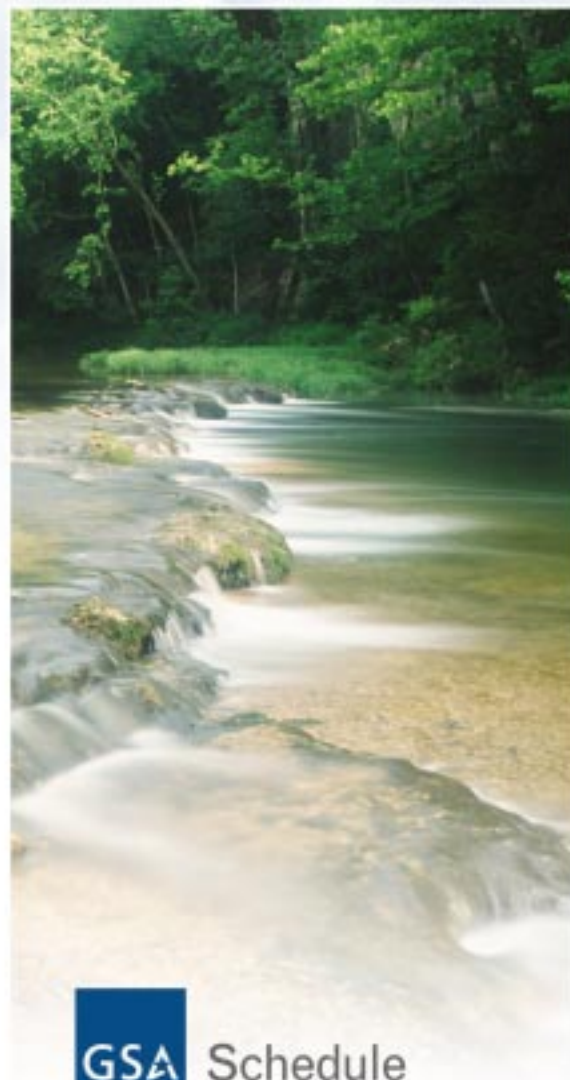
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